

AIR COMMAND & STAFF COLLEGE

THE PASHTUN OF SOUTHERN AFGHANISTAN:  
CONTEXTUALIZING A “HEARTS AND MINDS MESSAGE”

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## Introduction

In order to achieve success in the current counter-insurgency fight in Afghanistan, recent military guidance has focused on winning the “hearts and minds” of the Afghani population. This type of warfare requires innovative new approaches, and thought regarding affecting a population’s support of a government, and the ideals it represents. Afghani people are being asked to reject Taliban governance in favor of a new Afghan National Government supported by the US led coalition. The goal of coalition forces is to create a stable Afghanistan with the ability to control and restrict terrorist activities. The way ahead is littered with cross-cultural landmines. Forces acting on behalf of the coalition, and by extension the Afghan central government, must understand these cultural landmines in order to be successful in a “hearts and minds” campaign. The remainder of this paper will focus on the Pashtun people group of southern Afghanistan depicted in Figure 1.<sup>1</sup> These proud people comprise 40% of Afghanistan’s population, and represent the largest ethnic group within Afghanistan proper. Understanding Pashtun culture will enable identification of common core beliefs which can be a starting point



for critical Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) negotiations. With proper cultural training, PRTs will be able to effectively contextualize the coalition’s message, and successfully win the hearts and minds of the Pashtun people.

**Figure 1**

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua Project, “Pashtun. Southern, Afghan of Afghanistan”, <https://www.joshuaproject.net/print.php?rog3?=AF&rop3=107909>, accessed 11 March 2010.

## History

Pashtun history is characterized by various periods of invasion from both Eastern and Western threats. Legend has it the Pashtun people, also referred to as Pushtun or Pakhtun, are descendants of one of Israel's original twelve tribes, possibly even King Saul himself.<sup>2</sup> Alexander the Great faced fierce opposition to his conquest of the Pashtun, and regarded them as his most difficult opponent. It took six major crusades of Arabs to impose Islam on these proud people in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>3</sup> The British attempted three major campaigns against the Pushtun and were never successful in fully subjugating them to British control. Eventually, the British resorted to a divide and conquer strategy by weakening the tribal structure with the Durand Line of Demarcation. This line eventually became the dividing line between Pakistan and Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> Today, this arbitrary division has proved problematic for governmental intervention and control of terrorist activities.

The formal state of Afghanistan was founded in 1747 when Ahmad Shah Durrani unified the Pashtun tribes.<sup>5</sup> The name Afghani was bestowed upon these people by their Persian neighbors. It means "unruliness" or "upheaval", and gives insight into the fierce character of the Pashtun people.<sup>6</sup> The country served as a buffer between the Russian and British empires until it won its independence from notional British control in 1919. It was a democratic state until a coup in 1973. This was followed by a Communist counter-coup in 1978, which effectively ended the democratic experiment. The Soviets invaded in 1979 to prop up the failing

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Adopt-A-People Clearinghouse, "The Pushtun: A Tough People in a Hard Land," *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, (Vol. 12:1 Jan/Feb, 1995), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> CIA-World Factbook-Afghanistan, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>, accessed 10 March 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Adopt-A-People Clearinghouse, 9.

communist regime. They occupied Afghanistan until 1989, when internationally-backed, anti-Communist mujahedin fighters forced their withdrawal.<sup>7</sup>

The power vacuum left by this withdrawal was filled by tribal civil war, eventually resulting in a Pakistani backed, hard-lined Taliban government taking power in 1996. Following September 11, 2001, the US allied with Northern Alliance freedom fighters to oust the Taliban for their support of al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Currently, a democratically elected government has been installed, and progress towards a stable central government has been made following the first elections in 2004. The government faces a resurgent Taliban presence, and continuing provincial instability in the south and east, where Pashtun tribal leaders are choosing between Taliban rule and a democratic central government.<sup>8</sup> Despite their troublesome history, the Pashtun people have a wonderfully vibrant culture based upon the Pashtunwali, or “the Pashtun way”.<sup>9</sup>

### Culture



The Pashtun people are a proud, tough, hot-tempered, bold, fearless people who are resistant to change.<sup>10</sup> They speak Pashto or Dari, the official trade language of Afghanistan. Their economy is mostly agriculturally based with primary cash crops being opium, wheat, fruits, and nuts. They also raise domestic animals for wool, mutton, sheepskins, and lambskins. Besides agriculture, they have small-scale, industrial capacity to produce textiles, soap, furniture, shoes, non-alcoholic beverages, and hand-woven carpets. In addition, they have some natural gas, coal, and

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<sup>7</sup> CIA-World Factbook-Afghanistan.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Utmost-Highest Media, “The Pushtun of Afghanistan & Pakistan,” video download from Bluebehemoth.com 11 March 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Adopt-A-People Clearinghouse, 9.

copper resources. Since the fall of the Taliban, their economy has received a large infusion of aid from international assistance for recovery from nearly a decade of fighting. Unfortunately, Afghanistan is still extremely poor, and remains highly dependent upon foreign aid, trade with neighboring countries, and agriculture. Currently, they have around 35% unemployment with nearly 36% of their population living below the poverty line. Recent challenges associated with the Afghani economy include corruption, weak government capacity to provide for civil services, poor job creation, low revenue collection associated with weak central governance, and poor public infrastructure.<sup>11</sup>

Religion is an integral part of Pashtun life. Their geographic region has been the birthplace of two major religions: Hinduism, and Zoroastrianism. Prior to the forced imposition of Islam in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century, Buddhism was a dominant force in the area.<sup>12</sup> However, the Pashtun people are currently 99% Muslim. Of the Muslim population, 80% are Sunni, 19% are Shia, and the remaining 1% is classified as other.

The Pashtunwali and Islam are major driving forces behind Pashtun culture. Pashtunwali is a very strict code of honor which supersedes even the role of Islam within the lives of the Pashtun people.<sup>13</sup> The basic principles of this “code of ethics” include: hospitality and protection for guests, provision of refuge to a fugitive, and acceptance of a sincere offer of peace. Behaviors expected include: bravery, steadfastness, persistence, defense of property and family honor, protection of female relatives—to include fighting to the death for such reasons.<sup>14</sup> The concept of Bedal, or “blood revenge”, is also inculcated within the Pashtunwali. This practice

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<sup>11</sup> CIA-World Factbook-Afghanistan

<sup>12</sup> Adopt-A-People Clearinghouse, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Utmost-Highest Media

<sup>14</sup> Joshua Project

could most closely associate to the “eye for an eye” maxim found in the Old Testament.<sup>15</sup>

Overall, their culture is collectivistic with tribal elders making most decisions pertinent to the good of the tribe.<sup>16</sup> There is a large power-distance relationship within the culture and a high sense of honor and face. For instance, a woman’s family may not feel she needs to wear a Burkha, or full length dress with mesh opening for seeing to navigate, outside of the home. However, if a more fundamentalist Afghan confronts the woman in public, the male relative responsible for her actions may feel he needs to beat her publicly for not wearing proper dress and “shaming” the family.<sup>17</sup> Although women are protected by the Pashtunwali, they have very little status in public, but in private they wield a great deal of power.

The role of family is everything to a Pashtun. The women are the primary caregivers in Pashtun society. Male children are highly valued in Pashtun society. Their first marriage will be arranged by their mother, but a Pashtun male may take on as many wives as he feels needed. They will all be seen as equals in the household and share responsibility for all primary caregiver duties. Although this is acceptable, the responsibility of a man to his wife is taken very seriously, and multiple wives brings with it grave responsibility for the husband to provide for his wives. One example given for marrying a second wife is the inability of a wife to have children. In this instance, both wives were equals in the household, and the second wife gave one of her children to the first wife for her to rear as her own child.<sup>18</sup> The collectivistic nature of the culture is clearly seen in the relationship these women had with one another. The culture is vertically oriented with tribal elders at the top, followed by other tribal men, and then women at the lowest public role within the tribe.

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<sup>15</sup> Utmost-Highest Media

<sup>16</sup> Scott A. Moreau; Corwin, Gary R.; McGee, Gary B., *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical and Practical Survey*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 274.

<sup>17</sup> Taken from a discussion with a friend who is married to a Pashtun woman now living in America

<sup>18</sup> Taken from a discussion with a Pashtun translator who worked for the US military in Afghanistan

## **Proposed Strategy**

One way of looking at the current “hearts and minds” strategy is to inspect similar campaigns from other organizations. The evangelical church has a mission to spread the gospel in a cross-cultural context, and may present a framework for conveying a secular message in a similar manner. A coherent plan may find roots in examining their strategy as both messages face the same obstacles related to contextualization and cultural “landmines”.

The evangelical churches’ first aspect of developing a strategy is leveraging “insiders” who understand the cultural context of the Gospel message.<sup>19</sup> The Gospel can be and needs to be contextualized effectively for the Pashtun people. They understand love and value family. They have an acute sense of right and wrong which is played out in a warrior ethos with honor and face as primary areas of concern for men. Although they seem to oppress women in public, the role of women in their culture is indispensable. Jesus death on the cross for the renewal of humanity’s relationship with God is easily contextualized in their culture by tying it to their willingness to die for the defense of their honor, family, and lands. This step is very important for missionaries. They must be able to use the insights of “insiders”, and the Holy Spirit to prepare a properly contextualized Gospel message for the Pashtun people.<sup>20</sup> The coalition should also do contextualization research for their training of the PRT members.

With a properly contextualized message, one can also identify some commonalities within the Muslim religion which lend themselves towards “convertibility”. For instance, Islamic value of right worship toward God, rejection of idolatry, and God’s purpose for humanity revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. Missionaries must understand and humbly appreciate the

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<sup>19</sup> Gene Davis, “Sustaining a People Group Movement”, *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, (Vol. 12:1 Jan/Feb, 1995), 35.

<sup>20</sup> Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1999), 528.



similarities between our religions in order to avoid detracting from relationship building by appearing arrogant and inflexible.<sup>21</sup> While coalition forces will not be trying to “convert” Islamic believers, they must understand there are similarities between Islam and Christianity which may allow PRT members to build relations through similar beliefs. The Pashtun readily talk about their religion, and it represents a large part of their lives. With a properly contextualized message and training, PRTs must look for avenues to connect with the Pashtun.

Recent activity within Afghanistan may have actually created an environment more open for relationship building than ever before. Usually, people who have been recently dislocated or experiencing major change may find themselves more open to new ideas.<sup>22</sup> This may also be the key to the Pashtun. Many have been affected by recent fighting, and some have migrated to Kabul following the ousting of the Taliban. Generally speaking, the Pashtun who have moved to the city are less fundamental in their following of Islam, and more open to change.<sup>23</sup> PRTs within large cities can dramatically shift ideas through a properly contextualized message, and provision of stable, basic governmental services. However, a large part of Afghanistan is rural, and most of the Pashtun reside in these rural tribal villages. PRT teams must be able to take their message to these tribes, but it will require a different approach.

The second focus for PRTs is more of a relief and transformational development strategy.<sup>24</sup> The Pashtun have many needs associated with public health and well-being. For instance, the system of roads in Afghanistan severely limits the ability of farmers to get a large crop to market. Trade is limited and farmers are forced to find a crop which is more easily

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<sup>21</sup> Winter & Hawthorne, 513-514.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 560-561.

<sup>23</sup> Afghan interpreter discussion.

<sup>24</sup> Winter & Hawthorne, 605.

transported. Unfortunately, this crop is opium. A relatively small amount brings enough money for a family for a year.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, improving the roads gives farmers more options.

A second issue for farmers is access to water and crop yields. They do not have very good access to water, and their crops suffer because of this limitation. Unfortunately, opium does not require much water, and brings plenty of revenue. The Taliban and al Qaeda readily buy a farmer's opium to finance their terrorist activities. Weak governance allows illicit activities like this to thrive, despite a farmers desire to produce legitimate crops. Many farmers will grow an opium crop, and bury it for later when their primary efforts fail.<sup>26</sup> Better farming and agricultural techniques can utilize scarce water resources more effectively, and produce higher yields for crops.

A third issue facing farmers is animal health. The land of the Pashtun is rugged. The Pashtun people are dependent upon their animals for food, and wealth. If an animal is sick, it impacts the farmer, and their entire community because of the resource loss it represents to the tribe. There are very few trained veterinarians working in Afghanistan and they have limited access to medicine.

Finally, a last issue facing the Pashtun tribes is health of their people. Doctors and medicine are always needed and appreciated. In particular, women's health is difficult to attend to because of Islamic taboos. Women doctors are needed to help with women's health issues, childbirth, and general healthcare.

Each of these issues open doors for PRTs with special skill sets. For example, water engineers, and farmers prepared with genetically engineered seed crops can make a huge difference in a tribe's economy, and social well-being by becoming less dependent upon opium

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<sup>25</sup> Friend discussion

<sup>26</sup> Translator discussion

for their livelihood. Doctors and veterinarians will raise the standard of living in a tribe through better health care, and more stable animal population. They may require some external support for such critical medical supplies, tools, and equipment.

Many of these needs are being addressed by the US military through cooperation with NGOs. US military goals and NGO goals overlap considerably. They want to create a society stable enough for their security presence to be unnecessary, and terrorist ideology to not thrive. The US is trying to help the Pashtun address many of the social concerns above by working with NGOs. The military provides security while NGOs alleviate needs in an effort to give the Pashtun better options than fighting for the Taliban, or joining al Qaeda. Long-term intervention with a tribe through provision of key needs within the tribe will open the hearts of many within the tribe. The focus of these efforts should be on relations with the tribal elders. The PRT should make sure to include at least one female member for interaction with the women. While the men sit around and discuss topics, the women gather regularly to discuss their own issues.<sup>27</sup> Winning the hearts and minds of the women is critical to this strategy as they wield a great deal of power within the family. This strategy can produce family conversions towards support of the new government, or at least lack of support to terrorist and Taliban activities. An entire tribal conversion may occur if the chief becomes a convert to the new ideas presented. At the very least, persuasion of the women will produce a change in the tribe because the children will be more likely to follow their mother's guidance in the long term. In general, this strategy relies upon the whole person approach by providing for critical needs within the tribal structure.

In summary, PRT approaches in the cities and rural tribes may be focused using a platform strategy in conjunction with the current US relief work and NGO work. The city plan relies on credible delivery of essential services tied to the new central government. Once these

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<sup>27</sup> Interpreter discussion

people understand the contextualized message and believe it, the government will begin to see their support spread through the people because the PRT's message is being spread by people within the culture.

The rural plan focuses on teams of critical workers interacting closely with the tribal elders to improve the lives of the tribe in a whole person concept. It relies upon building a bond to the tribe and working for family adoption of the new ideas within the tribe. Once these tribes begin to see the benefits of PRT special skills like road building, veterinary medicine, and medical care, they will begin to listen to their contextualized message. With adoption of the message by the locals, the message becomes more powerful because it is being spread by people within the culture. The bottom line is coalition forces must first understand the culture of their target population in order to develop a message properly contextualized for winning hearts and minds in support of the new government, or as an alternative, not in support of the Taliban and terrorist training. Once the message is contextualized, they must seek adoption of the message from the locals by tying its message to significant change for the better. Once locals understand the message and see the change, they will begin to spread the message for support of the government and the message will gain strength.

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